

COMMENT PERIOD OPEN FOR ENERGY CORRIDORS

By Eve Byron

Details on proposed “energy corridors” in 11 Western states emerged this week with the release of a draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement.

In Montana, the proposed corridors cover 102 miles over 42,000 acres of federal land, including four segments on the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail and through the Italian Peak Roadless Area in the Beaverhead National Forest.

Corridors include segments southwest of Basin, southeast of Butte along I-15, as well as west of Missoula along I-15.

Overall, the corridors include 6,000 miles over almost 3 million acres in Montana, California, Nevada, Colorado, Utah, Washington, Oregon, Wyoming, Idaho, New Mexico and Arizona.

The draft PEIS considers only two options — the mandated “no action alternative” and the proposed alternative. A meeting on the proposal will be held in 11 states, including Montana, and the public has until Feb. 14 to comment on the document.

Jonathan Shrader, spokesman for the Department of Energy, said the federal agencies putting the document together decided to limit the options because this is a preliminary action.

“There’s still the idea that when utilities or companies decide they want to use a corridor for power, infrastructure or something like that, they’ll still have to go through (additional environmental review),” Shrader said. “And during the public comment period, we’ll take into consideration some other routes or options, if that’s what people want.”

The energy corridors, which are proposed only for federal lands, are part of Section 368 of the Energy Policy Act of 2005. The corridors represent the preferred locations for oil, natural gas, and hydrogen pipelines, as well as electricity transmission and distribution facilities.

Once projects are actually proposed for these corridors, they would undergo additional environmental review before permits were issued and rights-of-way were granted.

The Energy Act grew out of frustration over the length of time it takes the energy industry to get approval to run pipelines and power lines. The Department of Energy and the Bureau of Land Management were tasked with putting together the corridors, and are working on the project with other federal land agencies, including the U.S.

Forest Service and the Department of Defense.

Two states — California and Wyoming — also have signed on as cooperating agencies, as well as six local governments in Wyoming. In addition, at least a dozen American Indian tribes want a say in the corridors' locations, and the federal Fish and Wildlife Service also wants to be involved.

“The agencies involved in designating these corridors worked for nearly two years to develop the locations presented in the Draft EIS,” said Assistant Secretary of the Interior C. Stephen Allred. “From the beginning, we were committed to avoiding the many unique areas and sensitive resources found on Western public lands, wherever possible. Designating these corridors will minimize the dispersal of rights-of-way for energy transport projects across Western landscapes.”

One of the issues covered in the draft PEIS involves maps that people can download to look at the exact location of the proposed corridors.

During the scoping process, when the public provided issues they wanted looked at in the PEIS, one of the biggest problems involved the inability of the DOE and BLM to provide the exact potential location of the corridors.

The online version of the draft PEIS includes a link to GoogleEarth, with the corridors drawn in yellow. This allows the public to zoom in on the proposed corridors to see their precise locations.

The ability to view the proposed corridors is important because they only cover federal lands. During the scoping process, numerous landowners wanted to know what would happen in the West, where public and private lands are interspersed.

The question of whether the private landowners could be forced to allow the corridors to cross their land — invoking eminent domain — hasn't been answered, and officials have said it probably won't be until actual projects are proposed for a corridor.

The PEIS notes that “... Project applicants would secure authorizations across private lands in the same manner that they currently do, independent of the application process for corridors on federal lands.”

During the scoping period, recommended widths for the corridors ranged from as narrow as 60 feet to more than five miles. A corridor width of 3,500 feet — a little more than half a mile — was selected with the thought it would provide sufficient room for multiple energy transport systems.

“For example, assuming an operational (right of way) width of 400 feet, about 9 individual 500-kV transmission lines could be supported within a 3,500-foot-wide corridor,” the PEIS states. “As another example, as many as 35 liquid petroleum pipelines ... or 29 natural gas pipelines ... could be supported within a 3,500-foot-wide

corridor.

“While such development is unrealistic, these examples illustrate the capacity of a 3,500-foot-wide corridor to support multiple energy transport projects.”

It recommends corridors generally follow existing transmission routes or highways; the proposed corridors do so about 61 percent of the time.

However, the proposed corridors do cross through 12 national parks, monuments or recreation areas and three wildlife refuges. That’s down from the initial consideration that involved 29 national parks, monuments or recreation areas; 15 wildlife refuges and 58 wilderness areas.

But it also crosses roadless areas in Montana, Utah, Oregon, Nevada and California.

The proposal is not without controversy even within the federal government. The executive summary notes that the decision was made that just designating a corridor wouldn’t have any effect on endangered species, which otherwise would prompt a review under the Endangered Species Act.

However, the summary notes that the National Marine Fisheries Service doesn’t agree with that determination.

In a letter sent in June, the marine service argues that these designations “may affect” listed species, and asked the DOE to consult them before designating the corridors.

In the PEIS, the authors state that having considered that position, it respectfully disagrees.

How to comment

To submit comments and to review the draft PEIS and related documents visit the project Web site at <http://corridoreis.anl.gov>. Review copies also are available at libraries and agency regional and field offices.

Comments will be accepted through Feb. 14. Two public meetings will be held in Helena on Jan. 29, during which oral comments will be accepted. The meetings are at the Best Western Great Northern Hotel from 2 to 5 p.m. and 6 to 8 p.m.